

## Memory Making in Folk Epics of China: The Intimate and the Local in Chinese Regional Culture

Anne E. McLaren. New York: Cambria Press, 2022. 360 pp. \$119.99 (hbk). ISBN 9781621966654

Fei-wen Liu

Academia Sinica, Taipei, Taiwan

Email: [fwliu@gate.sinica.edu.tw](mailto:fwliu@gate.sinica.edu.tw)

This is the first major English-language monograph on the largely ignored singing tradition of the Han Chinese folk epics performed by illiterate men and women in the regions around Lake Tai, known as the Wu-dialect speaking zone of the lower Yangzi delta. For the villagers of Lake Tai, all songs, whether they be short or long, lyrical or narrative, are called “mountain songs” or *shange*. Singing *shange* had been an integrated part of villagers’ everyday life in this region since ancient times. Its significance, however, was grossly disregarded in Chinese written records and undermined by Chinese intellectuals who have tended (even nowadays) to perceive the cultural forms transmitted orally as “vulgar.” It was not until the early 20th century, as a response to Western imperial invasion, that some Chinese intellectuals began to look into folk culture for the roots of Chinese national identity; the folksong collecting movement led by Gu Jiegang in the 1920s was representative of such efforts. This folklore movement was soon disrupted by the Sino-Japanese War and civil wars. The next wave of folklore revival movement occurred in the early 1980s as a response to the massive destruction of traditions during the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976). The focus of this book is the *shange* that were “discovered” in the late 20th century, especially the long narrative songs (ranging from 2,000 to 20,000 lines) that were familiar to Wu-speaking populations in pre-contemporary China. The lengthy song narratives had been considered the cultural performance characteristic of the borderland ethnic groups, instead of the Han Chinese. McLaren’s study of these long narrative songs among the Han Chinese in the Lake Tai area is therefore pioneering and extremely important: it offers insights into the regional diversities of the Han Chinese culture and the relationship between local and the pan-Chinese culture.

With the recognition of songs as an indispensable vehicle for daily communication and a powerful medium for expressing intimacy and identity among communities in the lower Yangzi delta, the main thrust of this book is to investigate how the long narrative songs or “folk epics,” a term McLaren uses to refer not only to heroic but also non-heroic and romantic tales in epic length, may illustrate aspects of regional culture of Lake Tai that are unrecorded in the written traditions and remain unknown to the culture at large. Various types of folk epics are chosen for discussion; each is unique in its motif as well as textualization process. McLaren begins with a discussion of labouring songs, sung at work, whether toiling in the rice paddy field or poling the boat in the river. These are typically regarded as a form of secular entertainment, sung to lift physical fatigue of hard labour or to complain about the heavy exactions of the landlord or the imperial state. McLaren’s study shows, however, that labouring songs are also a type of “ritual technology” that provides a meaningful framework for collective action by coordinating the organization of communal labour. Moreover, these agricultural songs contain rich imageries of sexuality and women’s fertility and possess sacred power that is supposed to make the crops grow and invoke good harvest.

Private love affairs are another important dimension of *shange* in Lake Tai. Of the 28 extant love stories, five categories can be identified: love without family blessings, incest taboo violation (a brother-in-law forcing himself on his wife’s younger sister), ghost marriage, extramarital pregnancy, and eloping. This book deals with the first three types (in chapters four and five).

These tales of secret passion, stigmatized as “unhealthy” and excised in anthologies edited by Chinese intellectuals for the general reader, often end with catastrophic consequences such as death, quite contrary to the mainstream Chinese love stories with a happily-ever-after conclusion. Here McLaren provides a very convincing analysis, showing us how these songs celebrate the delights of love while lamenting the dead.

The story of “Shen Seventh Brother” and “Hua Mountain Lifter” discussed in chapters three and six both carry political implications, but in different ways. “Shen Seventh Brother” describes Shen as the local hero who brought the knowledge of rice cultivation to the Lake Tai region in ancient times, challenging the official discourse that it was Prince Tai Bo (heir to Emperor Tai of the Zhou Dynasty) from the north who brought sedentary civilization to the “primitive” south in the 11th century BC. As to “Hua Mountain Lifter,” a story of a bandit-rebel who leads an uprising during the anti-rent campaigns of the later imperial era, it encodes community memories of rent resistance movements going back to the Ming period. While examining the meanings of specific folk epics, this book also discusses how the longer form of narrative songs developed under the local influence of song competitions and amateur song troupes and within the broader context of the commercialization of the economy, the growth of market towns, and burgeoning popular market for printed texts (chapter two).

With its lucid writing style and the diverse topics treated, this book can be used for college courses on Chinese and comparative literature, Chinese social history, Chinese cultural studies, Chinese gender studies and folklore studies. It should also appeal to general readers interested in world literature and folk culture.

doi:10.1017/S0305741023000590

## Hong Kong Takes Flight: Commercial Aviation and the Making of a Global Hub, 1930s–1998

John D. Wong. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2022. 339 pp.  
\$60.00; £52.95; €54.95 (hbk). ISBN 9780674278264

Florence Mok

Nanyang Technological University, Singapore  
Email: [florence.mok@ntu.edu.sg](mailto:florence.mok@ntu.edu.sg)

While there is extensive scholarly work that examines the development of commercial aviation as a global phenomenon that led to increased mobility in the West, there are relatively fewer studies with a geographical focus on Asia, and most of these tend to emphasize the successes of the major companies. Hong Kong, a major nexus of commercial aviation, connecting the city not only with other regional hubs in East and Southeast Asia, but also with cities in Europe and North America, has so far been under-explored. John D. Wong’s *Hong Kong Takes Flight: Commercial Aviation and the Making of Global Hub, 1930s–1998* makes an original contribution to the existing literature by exploring how Hong Kong evolved into a commercial aviation global hub amid widespread decolonization, the advent of the Cold War, increased metropole–periphery tensions and domestic changes. Through analysing how Hong Kong’s historical development and its commercial aviation industry influenced each other’s development paths, Wong convincingly argues that the city’s development into a regional and global hub was “not preordained” (p. 7) and that such an outcome was